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NATIONAL STANDARDIZATION: TREATMENT OF NAMES IN MULTILINGUAL AREAS

Translators and place names in Finland

Paper submitted by Finland**

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Language legislation

Finland is officially a bilingual country. The status of the languages of Finland was defined in the Constitution of the new Republic of Finland on 17 July 1919. According to article 14 (1), Finnish and Swedish are the national languages of the country, and as such they have the status of official or State languages. The central principle of this language legislation is to establish the equality of the national languages. A national language is therefore regarded as the native language of the nation, as opposed to a "foreign language".

Finnish civil rights underwent a reform on 1 July 1995 and article 14 of the Constitution was also revised to reconfirm that the country is officially bilingual and that Finnish and Swedish are the national languages. Article 14 (3) further states that in addition to the Finnish and Swedish speakers, other language groups likewise have the right to maintain and develop their own culture. This statement also gives the Sámi people (the Lapps) the right to use their own language when dealing with officials (15.3.1991/516).

As far as languages are concerned, the general principles of the Finnish Constitution also form the basis of the Language Act (1.6.1922/148) and its changes. According to the Act, administrative and autonomous areas (municipalities, counties, courts of justice, dioceses etc.) are divided into monolingual Finnish or Swedish areas and bilingual areas in which the majority language is either Finnish or Swedish.

A municipality or other administrative or autonomous area covering one municipality is monolingual if its inhabitants all speak the same language or if the number of speakers of the second language is less than 8 per cent. An area is considered to be bilingual if the proportion of speakers of the second language is 8 per cent or at least 3,000. This area cannot be declared monolingual until the number of speakers of the second language has diminished to 6 per cent or less (10.1.1975/10).

According to the Language Act, all public notices and proclamations, announcements and other documents given by officials to the public have to be written in the local language in monolingual areas and in both languages in bilingual areas. The language legislation in Finland, and especially the proceedings in the official language aimed at the public, are based on the principle that the two language groups shall be treated equally. The only exception is the Autonomous Province of Åland, where Swedish is the only official language.

How to choose which place name to use

The language legislation of Finland makes no mention of the use of place names in languages other than Finnish or Swedish. Many monolingual administrative areas, such as municipalities, have an official name in both languages, and when drafting documents, one has to use the name in the language of the document. Problems may arise when it is necessary to use other languages - for instance, in brochures, reports and maps meant for international

use. If the same object has two official names and one wants to present both, one has to choose which to mention first. Another problem is that, due to the nature of the text, one may not want to repeat both names, and a question arises as to which would be most appropriate.

Recommendation of the Language Boards

In January 1997, the Finnish and Swedish Language Boards of the Research Institute for the Languages of Finland discussed the use of place names of Finland that occur in texts of different languages. Since equality of the national languages is the central principle in the Finnish Constitution, the Boards gave the following recommendations:

- In Finnish, Finnish place name forms are to be preferred; in Swedish, Swedish name forms are to be preferred; and in Sámi, Sámi name forms are to be preferred. (As to the choice between Finnish and Swedish name forms in Sámi, the Sámi Language Board will provide a statement later.)

- In languages that are closely related to Finnish, name forms in Finnish should be preferred, unless no other established names exist in the languages in question.

- In Scandinavian languages, Swedish name forms should be preferred, unless no other established names exist in the languages in question. Among the Swedish names of the municipalities of Finland there are, in addition to those officially confirmed in 1982, many unofficial names which have been used for a long time. In official contexts, however, only official names should be used.

- In foreign languages, names of monolingual areas should appear in the form they have in the official language of those areas (for instance, fi Iisalmi, sv Mariehamn), unless there are no other established names in the languages in question. For bilingual areas, the names in the majority language should be preferred (for instance, fi Helsinki, Turku, Vaasa; sv Jakobstad, Nykarleby, Pargas, Ekenäs.)

This recommendation is meant for translators and editors, and it concerns such public names as the names of rural and urban municipalities, counties, provinces, other administrative units, streets and roads. Furthermore, this recommendation is only meant for current documentary texts and especially for Finnish translators' needs.

In texts in a foreign language - except Scandinavian languages - place names would in practice be in the form that is presented first in signboards. For instance in Helsinki the language of the majority is Finnish, and accordingly in a translation one would find the street names Mannerheimintie fi and Liisankatu fi, not Mannerheimvägen or Elisabetsgatan. The names of many historical provinces were introduced into other languages while Finland was still part of the Swedish kingdom. Thus they have become established names (exonyms) in those languages - for instance, Karelia, Ostrobothnia and Lapland

in the English language. According to the recommendation, excepting the exonyms, the Finnish forms of the names of Finnish provinces should be used in texts in foreign languages, the only exception being the province of Åland (Ahvenanmaa fi), for which its Swedish name should be used in accordance with the local language. A gazetteer of Swedish place names of Finland and Finnish equivalents and indications of the eventual officiality of the name forms has been compiled by Zilliacus and Ådahl-Sundgren (1984).

The official names of the historical provinces, the new administrative provinces, the counties and the municipalities are listed in the Toponymic Guidelines of Finland. On maps, it is recommended that names be given in both languages, with the name in the local majority language on top.

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